

The Rule

My mom and dad have a rule. At every meal, Julian and I have to eat at least a little bit of everything on our plates. Julian doesn't mind. My mom says that ever since he was a baby he liked to eat every single vegetable and all kinds of strange foods. When I was born, my mom thought that I would be like Julian. I'm not. It's because of me that they made up the rule. Because of the rule, I have eaten a little bit of oysters and asparagus. I have eaten a little bit of eggplant and turnips. I have eaten a piece of radish so tiny that afterward I had to use a magnifying glass to show my parents there was something missing from the radish. Because of the radish they added to the rule. You cannot use a magnifying glass to prove you tasted something. You have to eat more of it than that. There is one other part to the rule. It is about restaurants. That part is: Food in restaurants is expensive. In a restaurant, if you order something, you better eat it all.

One day my mom and dad decided to take me out for dinner. They invited Gloria to come too. My mom told us to dress up for the restaurant, with dark pants and white shirts and our best Sunday shoes. Julian tried to dress to look grown up. I was worried about the rule. I tried to dress the best way for getting hungry. I fastened the belt on my pants very tight. I hoped that would make me hungry. We stopped and picked up Gloria, who was all dressed up too. She had on a pink dress and new shoes with bows on them. The name of the restaurant was King Henry's. There were lots of cars parked out front, and there was a red carpet leading inside. A man as dressed up as us opened the door and took us to a table. Our waiter was very tall and thin. He looked like he could eat ten dinners at

once and they would just disappear inside him. He probably knew the right way to wear his belt for getting hungry. When he brought us menus, I scrunched my neck around so I could see his belt. It was very loose! I loosened mine three notches. Right away I felt hungry.

The menu was in a leather holder. It was very big, with fancy gold and black writing. I looked for words I knew. A little card was pinned right in the middle of the first page: "Special" is my favorite word. I also like the words "giant," "fresh," and "rivers." The words made me very hungry. I loosened my belt one more notch. "What's trout?" I asked my mom. "It's a fish," she said.

"That's what I want," I said. "Are you sure?" my dad asked. "Are you sure you don't want a hamburger? That's what Julian's having. Or maybe you'd like the chef's salad? That's what Gloria's having.

"I'm sure," I said. "I want the special. " "You know you'll have to eat it when it comes,» my mom said. "I will," I said.

The thin man brought Julian's hamburger, Gloria's salad, and my mom and dad's chicken. He brought me the special. The giant mushrooms were all around the plate, just like a forest. The trout was in the middle. He wore his skin and his head. His mouth was open as if he was gasping for air. His eye was big and white and sad and cooked. It looked right straight at me. "Sorry," I said. I looked away.

I looked at the giant mushrooms. Their tops were like wings. They looked like a dark forest. They were a little mushy, but they still looked like rooms. Probably elves had lived under them and danced around them in the moonlight. If I ate one, I could be eating an elf's house.

But I had to do it. "Sorry," I said. I took my knife and fork. I cut myself a bite. It tasted like a buttered forest. I liked the taste. I ate all my mushrooms. "Huey ate all his mushrooms!" my mom said. "But," my dad said, "He hasn't touched his fish." "I will," I said.

I didn't want to touch it with my finger. I touched the tail with my knife. The eye of the fish looked at me. I stopped touching its tail. I wondered if I was supposed to eat the eye. If I had to, I would eat the tail first. I would save the eye till last. I could eat the fish if I didn't look at it. But it is hard to eat your food if you don't look at it. You keep missing the plate with your fork. There were mirrors on two sides of the room. I could see my fork miss the plate two ways. I could see the heaps of salad left on Gloria's plate. "Mrs. Bates," Gloria said, "Do you mind if I don't eat all my salad?" "Of course not, honey," my mom said. "You're a guest. "

I turned around in my chair and looked at the back of the room. There was an aquarium! It was full of purple fish, live ones with frilly tails like ballerinas' dresses. They were watching me. It looked like they were talking to each other. They wanted to see what I would do. "Sorry," I muttered to the purple fish. I put the fork in my lap. "Huey," my dad said, "we're almost done." "Sorry," I said. "You don't have to eat the head or the tail or the skin," my mom explained. "Just break the skin open and eat the flesh."

"Flesh!" I said. "Meat," my mom said. "Huey - if you finish your fish, you can have ice cream," my dad promised.

I moved my legs. My fork slipped out of my lap and so did my napkin. Right away the thin man saw. He picked them up and took them away. Then he put a clean fork by my plate. He handed me a fresh napkin.

I remembered something I saw once on TV - a live heart operation. The doctors didn't look at the patient. They kept him covered with a cloth. My mom said they did it so they could forget he was a person and cut. I took my fresh napkin and threw it over my whole fish, all but the middle.

Julian almost choked on a piece of bread. "Huey's napkin!" he said, pointing.

"Yuck!" Gloria said. "Huey!" my dad exclaimed. "Your manners!" my mom reminded. I didn't listen. There wasn't time.

I picked up my fork. I took a big chunk out of the fish's side, and chewed it, and swallowed it. I swallowed three times extra for safety. I ate nine more big bites.

"Huey ate almost all of it," Gloria said. "Huey has to eat it all," Julian said. "That's the rule!"

I looked at Mom and Dad. "Do I have to?" I said. I felt awfully full. "Julian," my mom said, "rules aren't absolute. People make rules to make life better. If a rule doesn't work, it can be changed." My dad said, "Huey ate a lot of good food tonight. If he eats more, he might burst."

My mom said, "I'm proud of Huey. He ate two new foods. He was adventurous." It sounded like I was a hero. An explorer maybe.

"But what about the rule?" Julian protested. "Maybe we don't even need it anymore," my mom said. "What do you think, Huey?"

I looked at my plate. The mushrooms were all gone. I'd eaten almost all the fish. Julian never ate that much. If he ever tried it in a restaurant, he could never do it. "Let's keep the rule," I said.